

VZCZCXRO5026  
PP RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHDIR  
DE RUEHDO #0401/01 1691256  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 181256Z JUN 09 ZUI HCB1366 ZDK  
FM AMEMBASSY DOHA  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9157  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DOHA 000401

SENSITIVE, SIPDIS

FOR NEA/ARP

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [SOCI](#) [QA](#)  
SUBJECT: EXPATS SHARE VIEWS ON QATAR WITH FELTMAN

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(SBU) KEY POINTS  
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-- (SBU) Thoughtful expatriates shared their views about Qatar and its relations with the United States with NEA AA/S Jeffrey Feltman on June 16.

-- (SBU) Brookings Doha Center director Hady Amr advised that Qatar's unique geography and demography drove much of its approach to foreign policy.

-- (SBU) The Turkish Ambassador to Qatar explained that Qatar's energy relationships were an example of its tying the interests of key countries to Qatar's security.

-- (SBU) RAND-Qatar Policy Institute Director Richard Darilek explained that Qatar was undertaking an ambitious reform of its entire K-12 education system by converting its schools to "independent" schools along the lines of charter schools in the United States, based on policy advice from RAND.

-- (SBU) Al Jazeera English (AJE) Director Tony Burman rejected the idea that AJE reporting, particularly on Iran, was guided by Qatar's policy objectives. AJ, he said, is more like a "country within a country" rather than an integral part of Qatar.

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COMMENTS  
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-- (SBU) These views represent a good snapshot of how some thoughtful outsiders think of Qatar's national security strategy. Post is fortunate to have such distinguished American think tanks as Brookings and RAND to help us understand this country.

-- (SBU) While Tony Burman may be correct in viewing Al Jazeera's 3,000 employees in this small nation as almost a "country within a country," it was hard not to notice that AJ's coverage of Iran paled in comparison to its wall-to-wall, sensationalist coverage of events in Gaza in January, and to wonder what drives these different approaches.

END KEY POINTS

¶1. (SBU) On June 16, Acting Assistant Secretary for Near East Affairs Jeffrey Feltman met over dinner at the Ambassador's residence with five thoughtful expatriates who have worked in Qatar for a number of years. Each offered his views of why Qatar pursues the foreign and domestic policies that it does.

¶2. (SBU) Hady Amr, Director of the Brookings Doha Center, said that much of Qatar's behavior internationally can be explained by geography and demography. Geographically, Qatar is a tiny country wedged between Saudi Arabia and Iran, both of which are many times larger. Demographically, Qatar has only about 200,000 citizens;

with an annual GDP of over USD 100 billion, that makes these citizens by far the richest in the world, in Amr's view.

¶3. (SBU) Amr also encouraged Feltman to think about the changes that Qataris have seen over the past several decades. "A Qatari in his 60s can still remember when even the Amir didn't have electricity," he noted, "and when their entire population could fit into a medium-sized football stadium."

¶4. (SBU) All of these factors give Qataris an elevated sense of vulnerability, Amr said, and drive the policies adopted by the Government. He said Qataris had explained to him that their drive for international conferences, their hosting of U.S. military bases, and their relentless engagement with others were all part of a strategy to protect Qatar. "We have no military," one Qatari told him, "so think of the conferences as our aircraft carriers, and the military bases as our nuclear weapons."

¶5. (SBU) The Turkish Ambassador to Qatar added that this same strategy was evident in Qatar's policy of building strong, direct energy relationships with key countries. "The South Hook LNG terminal in the UK," he explained, "was financed 65 percent by the Qataris, and they are also helping to build the Golden Pass terminal in the United States." These were examples, he said, of Qatar giving other countries a stake in its future.

¶6. (SBU) RAND-Qatar Policy Institute Director Dr. Richard Darilek stated that Qatar was active not only internationally, but was undertaking ambitious internal reforms as well aimed at helping Qatar transition to a knowledge-based economy. One example are Qatar's K-12 educational reforms, which were based on RAND's analysis and policy recommendations. Over the course of several years, Qatar is transforming its public schools to "independent" schools, which are based on the U.S. charter school model. Many Qataris have found reforms such as these coming at an overwhelming

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pace, but they are driven by the Amir and his Consort, Shaykha Mozah, so they are moving forward.

¶7. (SBU) Turning to Qatar's relations with Iran, AJE Director Tony Burman rejected the notion that Al Jazeera's coverage of post-election violence in Iran was in any way related to Qatar's views of that country. He noted that international journalists were under virtual house arrest in Iran, and that two AJ producers had been taken away by security forces in Afghanistan. Burman resented any suggestion that their courageous reporting was based on the policy considerations of Qatar. After a year on the job, he said, he often felt that Al Jazeera, with more than 50 nationalities represented, operated almost as a "country within a country," not as part of Qatari society.

¶8. (U) AA/S Feltman has cleared this cable.

LEBARON